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ABSTRACT

When reading educators encounter a student's interpretation of a text that is different than that which an author may have intended, they have to determine if such an interpretation is valid according to their criteria for students. Much of this rests with educators' conceptions of the reading process and the role of the reader in the interpretation of a text. If educators recognize the role that students' background knowledge plays in the interpretation of a text and the potential for valid interpretations that may differ from that of the author, then through what criteria do educators evaluate and judge students' interpretations? The main criterion will be a student's ability to produce textual evidence in support of his or her interpretation. A. Collins, J. S. Brown, K. M. Larkin, L. M. Phillips and Kang offer various models of thinking through which students may critically examine their own interpretations. That such processes occur is particularly crucial in the case of young students whose life experiences are limited and in the case of foreign students whose different cultural experiences may lead them to misinterpret texts. In both cases, interpretations should be seen as valid only if there is information in the text that is consistent with them. Emphasis should be placed on student justification of his or her interpretation as well as on student awareness of different interpretations that may be valid. (Contains nine references.) (TB)

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Evaluation of Interpretation of Text: Putting the Emphasis on the Student

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Sometimes when we as teachers encounter a student's interpretation of a text that is different than what an author may have intended, we have to determine if such an interpretation is valid according to some criteria we hold students to. Much of this rests on our conceptions of the reading process and the role of the reader in the interpretation of text. We may hold students to a strict interpretation according to what may be perceived as what the author had intended. However, if we recognize the role that students' background knowledge plays in the interpretation of text and the potential for valid interpretations that may differ from what an author may have intended, then through what criteria do we evaluate and judge whether the student's interpretation is a valid one, is a misinterpretation, or whatever?

This paper argues that the emphasis for evaluation of students' interpretations should be placed where it belongs: on the students and their cognitive and metacognitive abilities. However, this does not mean that we accept any interpretation that is based on their background knowledge as valid. The main criterion for evaluations of students' interpretations should be whether or not the students themselves can justify their interpretations, especially in terms of consistency, plausibility, and match between text and knowledge. This paper will list and discuss different strategies that students may use to evaluate and solve problems with consistency and plausibility. Discussion will focus on how teachers can help students develop the abilities and strategies to monitor their comprehension, evaluate their interpretations in terms of consistency and plausibility, use appropriate strategies to deal with problems and inconsistencies, and recognize alternative perspectives and intentions of authors.

In an excellent article on teaching multicultural literature, Reed Way Dasenbrock (1992) argues that some models or analyses of reading leave too much room for a reader different from an author and that, particularly in the case of cross-cultural literature, the problem is that "the reader is everywhere, the author is nowhere." (p. 38). She argues that too much emphasis may be placed on the knowledge that readers possess and not enough on the learning of knowledge while reading, particularly in the context of reading cross-cultural texts:

> What we need is a model of reading...which redescribes the scene of reading not as a scene of...the demonstrations of knowledge already in place, or as a failure of knowledge, but as a scene of learning...Knowledge does not come first and control the experience of the work of art; the experience of the work comes first and leads the experiencer towards knowledge." (pp. 39-40).

In a discussion of Donald Davidson's theories, Dasenbrock outlines a process of communication and interpretation that, though acknowledging the importance of background knowledge from which people use to initially create a set of expectations about the meanings of words another person will employ in a communicative event, places the main emphasis on the adaptations and changes people make in their interpretations as they encounter differences between prior interpretations and information in the communicative context that does not fit these prior expectations and interpretations.

Collins, Brown, and Larkin (1980) describe a similar process of adaptation and change in interpretations of written text. Readers construct partial models of the text from background knowledge activated by the beginning elements of the text and incorporate more and more of the text in successive models (p. 387). In interaction between background knowledge and information in the text, readers make inferences and interpretations and evaluate these in terms of their

consistency with other information in the text and their own knowledge of the world as they refine their models of the text:

> "...text understanding proceeds by progressive refinement from an initial model to more and more refined models of the text...The initial model is a partial model, constructed from schemas triggered by the beginning elements of the text. Successive models incorporate more and more elements from the text. The models are progressively refined by trying to fill the unspecified variable slots in each model as it is constructed. As the questions associated with the unfilled slots in more refined models become more and more specific, the search for relevant information is constrained more and more." (1980, p. 387)

As readers construct models of the text, they continually evaluate the plausibility of constructed models through evaluating:

- the plausibility of the default assumptions and consequences of the model.
- the completeness of the model.
- the interconnectedness of the assumptions or consequences of the model.
- the match of the model to the text.

As they monitor and evaluate their comprehension of the text, readers may encounter conflicts or anomalies between previously made interpretations or inferences and later information in the text. At this point, they may employ certain strategies such as confirming, disconfirming, or refining previous inferences or interpretations. In short, they modify and refine their interpretations of the text as they encounter conflicts. Some of the problem-solving strategies readers may use in revising models of the text (adapted from Collins, Brown, and Larkin, 1980; Phillips, 1987; Kang, 1991) are:

1. Rebinding - If the reader fills a slot in the schema, through inferencing, and then immediately realizes that this conflicts with previous information in the text, the reader tries another inference.
2. Confirming an immediate prior interpretation - This is when a reader makes an interpretation or inference, then confirms it on the basis of information immediately following it.
3. Questioning a default interpretation or a direct/indirect conflict - When readers fail to make progress in understanding the text, or when they find a conflict between a previous interpretation and later information, they may question earlier default assumptions, values, or interpretations instead of current ones.
4. Near or distant shift of focus - When the reader raises a question about the text that he/she cannot solve, they move to a closely related question or a more distantly related question, looking at the problem from another angle.
5. Case analysis and most likely case assignment - This is where the reader, instead of making one inference, may consider several plausible, tentative inferences and then choose the most likely, most plausible one.
6. Confirming a non-immediate prior interpretation - This is when a reader, after considering alternate interpretations to an earlier one already made, reverts to and confirms the earlier one, on the basis of subsequent information.
7. Assuming a default interpretation and transforming information - This is when a reader makes an incorrect interpretation and, when confronted with inconsistencies between the interpretation and new information in the text, distorts the new information in order to confirm the interpretation.

8. Putting a conflict on hold temporarily until more information is available - This strategy is used when the reader encounters a conflict or inconsistency between a previously made inference and later information in the text, is unable or unwilling to resolve the conflict at that time, and puts the resolution of the conflict on hold pending further information that would help resolve the problem.
9. Ignoring a conflict or inconsistency or dismissing it as unimportant - This strategy is used when a reader, upon encountering a conflict or inconsistency between a previously made inference and later information in the text, simply ignores the conflict and continues reading. Although sometimes an effort may be made to resolve the conflict, the reader decides that the conflict is not important enough to continue making the effort and goes on without any further efforts at finding a resolution to the conflict.

While a reader's background knowledge may lead to differences in interpretations, the interpretation still has to be evaluated according to what is found in the text. If there is no information in the text that contradicts or is inconsistent with such interpretations (and it meets other internal criteria of plausibility, interconnectedness and completeness) then how can we fault a reader for making such an interpretation? If we as teachers put the responsibility upon students to justify their interpretations, we must ensure that readers are able to evaluate their interpretations and are able to deal with problems with inconsistencies between knowledge and text. Numerous classroom practices have been designed to help readers activate and use their background knowledge while reading, but we also need to emphasize and implement practices which promote comprehension monitoring and development of appropriate problem-solving strategies. Problems may arise when readers activate and use background knowledge that is different from that presupposed

by the text. Readers may make inferences or interpretations that are inconsistent with information in the text. They may also fail to recognize these inconsistencies, ignore them, or distort information in the text to fit with their background knowledge and inferences. Beyond helping readers develop the abilities to activate and use their background knowledge, we need to make students more aware of the potential for inconsistencies between their background knowledge or inferential elaborations and information in the text as well as helping them develop metacognitive abilities to recognize and deal with such inconsistencies.

Readers may sometimes inject too much of their own personal knowledge and experience into the text, making numerous inferences that are not justified by the information in the text and general, conventional knowledge of human behavior, and this as well may have a significant effect upon their interpretation of the text, particularly if the knowledge they relied upon is specific to their culture. This can be illustrated by data from a study that Lipson (1983) conducted that demonstrated problems young readers may face when the text contains information that is contrary to their sociocultural knowledge. She had 4th to 6th grade students read and recall expository passages that were specific to the readers different religious backgrounds. One of the findings was that these readers' background knowledge had a negative effect upon their comprehension of unfamiliar text and led to a greater amount of implicit and explicit distortion in their recalls. These young readers had problems resolving conflicts between their background knowledge and information in the text, often resulting in distortions of the text itself, as the readers were more likely to distort the text information to make it fit with their previous interpretations rather than relinquish inaccurate notions in favor of text information (Lipson, 1984, p. 763). Lipson (1983, 1984) sees these difficulties in resolving such conflicts as perhaps

related to the inability of younger and poor readers to monitor their reading for inconsistencies and errors, with this inability to recognize and reconcile inconsistencies as perhaps being developmental.

Two other studies suggest that the effect of culture-specific knowledge upon readers' interpretation of text may be compounded not only by readers' inability to either recognize inconsistencies between their inferences or interpretations and information in the text, but also what they did, what kind of strategy they used, when they encountered and recognized such inconsistencies. Phillips (1987) investigated the strategies used by 6th grade students when reading familiar and unfamiliar text. When encountering inconsistencies between inferences or interpretations readers made and later information in the text, readers would question or disconfirm a previous interpretation or inference, or they would transform or distort information in the text to fit the previous interpretation. Recognition of the inconsistencies in many of these cases was not the issue so much as what the readers did when they encountered the inconsistency, and using the latter strategy, distorting information in the text, had negative effects upon these readers' comprehension of the text. This tendency to maintain inferences or assumptions in the face of sometimes ample counterevidence, like other poor reading habits, may become permanent without some kind of intervention. Kang (1991) found that some adult second language readers with high levels of language and reading proficiency demonstrated this tendency to distort information in the text to try to confirm inferences and interpretations, influenced by culture-specific background knowledge, they had made about certain characters' linguistic and non-linguistic behavior, mental states, and personality traits. Another strategy that at times contributed to negative effects of culture-specific schemata was the tendency to ignore or dismiss recognized inconsistencies as unimportant. The data in this study also

indicated that even a minor inference, based upon a reader's culture-specific knowledge has the potential to cause a chain reaction of further inferences and interpretations that ultimately may produce a significant global effect upon the interpretation of the text.

Besides culture-specific schemata, another source of interference may be just plain inaccurate notions or knowledge about the world. Young readers' schemata may be less articulate and contain details from fewer personal experiences or other sources than those of adults. Children may sometimes make inaccurate assumptions about the world from such limited experience, or overgeneralize from a few experiences to broader concepts or ideas. However inaccurate notions or concepts are come by, this type of "person-specific" schemata may interfere with the comprehension of text that is inconsistent with such background knowledge. A good illustration of such interference comes from the protocols of one young second language reader in the Basal Reader Project. In reading a story about a sheep named Argyle that, upon eating flowers, produced multicolored wool which its owner cut and make socks from, the reader early on stated the knowledge that people make clothes from sheep's skins "when they die". Though later parts of the story were clearly inconsistent with this notion, the reader continued to cling to this idea, ignoring later inconsistencies between the reader's schema and later information in the text as well as sometimes distorting information in the text to make it consistent with this schema.

One implication for second language reading education concerns this potential for different interpretations of a text due to differences in the background knowledge that readers bring to the process and the inferences that they may generate from culture-specific schemata. Alderson and Urquhart (1984) argue that some problems in second language comprehension "may be

met if the teacher becomes more aware of the possible existence of a large number of different interpretations of a text rather than a single comprehension...The students should be encouraged to accept that there may well be many different, but valid interpretations arrived at..." (p. 47). However, this advice to teachers must be accepted with extreme caution; it is true that there may exist the potential in the interactions between ESL readers and second language text for different interpretations, but these different interpretations should be seen as valid only if there is also not information in the text that is clearly inconsistent with different interpretations and inferences. Though we may value the diversity of knowledge that our readers bring with them to the reading task and recognize that readers' experiences may vary, emphasis should be placed on student justification of his or her interpretation as well as on student awareness of different interpretations that may be valid. If readers ignore or distort information in the text that conflicts with previous inferences as they are on their way to their different interpretation, we as teachers cannot accept such interpretations as valid. It may be common that readers, injecting their own sometimes culture-specific knowledge into the story, may arrive at different interpretations of text, but it is essential that readers recognize when their interpretations are at variance with other information in the text and have the strategic resources available to effectively deal with inconsistencies, contradictions, and problems.

As teachers, we can help young readers activate and use their background knowledge, but we can't really anticipate or control what particular background knowledge they may use. What we can do is help our students learn to evaluate their comprehension and deal with problems that may occur when the background knowledge they activate, or the inferences and interpretations they make from their background knowledge, is inconsistent with information in the

text. If students can effectively monitor and evaluate the validity of their interpretations and inferences, and employ the proper strategies when confronted with inconsistencies or contradictions between their interpretations and the information in the text, then they will not only learn to better comprehend the content of a second or foreign language (and culture) text, but be in a better position to recognize the differences between their culture and the culture of the target language, and accommodate their knowledge structures to gain new perspectives on, and learn, the culture of the target language. Through helping student develop the tools to be more responsible for their interpretations, we also help them develop increased abilities to learn from other cultures and perspectives.

One of the ways we can help our students develop these abilities is through more of a process-oriented approach to reading instruction. Two approaches that are well-suited to the task are discussed here. Palincsar and Brown (1984) designed an approach that teaches strategies that both promote and monitor comprehension. The strategies of summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting serve the functions of helping students activate background knowledge, draw and test different kinds of inferences, critically evaluate content for consistency with background knowledge (as well as for consistency between parts of the text), monitor their comprehension, allocate attention, and understand the purposes of reading. Collins and Smith (1982) designed an approach to help students generate, evaluate, and revise their hypotheses of the text. The instructional goals of the approach are to help students hypothesize about what is happening and will happen next, look out for comprehension failures and know how to remedy them, and recognize cues in the text that signal main points, themes, and narrative devices. Several strategies for comprehension problems are taught, such as ignoring the problem

and reading on, suspending judgment, forming tentative hypotheses, reading the current sentence, reading the previous context, and going to expert sources.

Both Palincsar and Brown's Reciprocal Teaching method and Collins and Smith's method use a teaching approach which initially introduces and models the skills to the students and then gradually turns over the responsibilities for using these skills to the students. In the procedure in Palincsar and Brown's method, the teacher initially modeled the strategies, encouraging students to participate whenever and however they could. Students gradually assumed the lead in using these strategies and generating the summaries, questions, clarifications, and predictions as the teacher guided them to increasing levels of competence and independence. Collins and Smith's method has a modeling stage in which teachers read aloud and comment on their hypotheses and monitoring. In the student participation stage, students are encouraged to practice the techniques while reading aloud, with the teacher gradually shifting the responsibilities for spotting comprehension failures and generating remedies to the students. In the last stage, students are encouraged to monitor their comprehension and make predictions while reading silently, with the help of comprehension questions and questions eliciting predictions inserted in the text.

These methods illustrate the type of reading instruction that young readers, particularly second language readers, need to cope with potential negative effects of certain background knowledge. With these and other such process-oriented approaches, we can help second language students become independent readers with the skills and tools to recognize and deal with whatever problems may arise.

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